HEARTPIERCER™

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"I LOVED KURRN. I DON'T DENY THAT.

"I OWED HIM MY LIFE. OWED HIM EVERYTHING.

"I WOULD HAVE GONE TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH TO PLEASE HIM.

"FOUGHT ANY BEAST, ANY MONSTER WAITING FOR ME THERE.

"BRING HIM ANY PRIZE HE DESIRED."

"AND I DID. ONE LAST TIME.

"IT WAS AS BEAUTIFUL AS THE LEGENDS SAID.

"SAVAGE. DEADLY. BUT BEAUTIFUL NONETHELESS.

"SMART, TOO.

"THE LEGENDS ALL SAID IT WOULD ONLY LET THE PUREST OF MAIDENS COME NEAR. THAT IT COULD SENSE THEIR INNOCENCE."

"IT DID NOT GIVE ITS TRUST EASILY. AND YET...

"ONCE DECIDED, IT GAVE THAT TRUST WHOLLY.

"LIKE A FOOL."

GROOOONK!

"A BEAUTIFUL FOOL."

"IT WAS NO EASY FIGHT. THEY NEVER ARE.

"BY HORN...

"OR BY HOOF, IT WOULD END ME.

"IF I WAVERED FOR BUT A MOMENT.

"WAVERING WAS NOT IN THE BEAST'S NATURE.

"NOR IN MINE.

"AND SO IT WENT."

ATALA. MY JEWEL. MY HEARTPIERCER.

"HEARTPIERCER. THAT WAS HIS SPECIAL NAME FOR ME. BECAUSE I NEVER MISSED, HE SAID."

KURRN, MY LORD.

"BUT THERE WAS ONE HEART ABOVE ALL I WISHED TO PIERCE."

I HAVE BROUGHT YOU YOUR PRIZE.

AT LAST.

"HIS."

"AFTER ALL I DID FOR HIM I THOUGHT, AT LAST..."

THE FINAL GREAT BEASTS, SLAIN. AND THE WORLD...

"AT LAST, WE COULD BE TOGETHER."

THE WORLD IS FREE! FREE FOR US TO MAKE IT OUR OWN.

"I KNEW HE THOUGHT ME BEAUTIFUL."

INDEED... MY HEARTPIERCER.

URK!

"BUT I REALIZED... TOO LATE."

"THAT I TOO..."

INDEED.

"WAS A BEAUTIFUL FOOL."

HEARTPIERCER

VOLUME 1: UNDER A BLOODSTAINED MOON

Writer: RICH DOUEK Artist: GAVIN SMITH Colorist: NICHOLAS MICHAEL Letterer: JUSTIN BIRCH

YOU SPOKE TRUE, ATALA.

IT IS TIME TO MAKE THE WORLD OURS.

A PITY SHE COULD NOT HAVE JOINED US, MY LORD KURRN.

SHE WAS THE FINEST AMONG YOU, BLIGHTEYE. THAT IS UNDENIABLE.

BUT SHE WOULD NEVER HAVE ACCEPTED THE TRUE PATH.

IT IS TIME, THEN.

YES. SPREAD THE WORD, TO ALL OUR BRETHREN. THE LAST GUARDIAN IS DEAD.

"OUR TIME HAS COME, AT LAST."

"AND FLY SHE DID...

"TO PLACES DARK, AND LONG FORGOTTEN."

"AND SHE SPOKE.

CAWWWW

CAW

"AND EVERYWHERE FOUND EARS EAGER TO LISTEN.

"UNTIL FINALLY..."

"SHE CAME AT LAST TO THE WORLD OF MEN."

CAW CAW CAW

CAW CAW CAW CAW CAW CAW CAW

"BUT THE CALL HAD BEEN HEEDED."

"AND ONE THING WAS CERTAIN."

"SHE DID NOT COME ALONE."

"AND I?

"I SANK DEEP.

"DEEP INTO THE SEA.

"DEEP...

"... INTO DARKNESS."

"HOW LONG DID I DRIFT?

"I DO NOT KNOW.

"I HAD DIED. I KNEW THAT FOR CERTAIN."

=GASP=

"AND YET..."

"SOMETHING BROUGHT ME BACK. JUST AS I WAS."

=COUGH= =COUGH=

"WELL, MOSTLY."

"AS I SAID, I KNEW NOT HOW LONG MY BODY DRIFTED BENEATH THE WAVES.

"ONE THING WAS ABUNDANTLY CLEAR. THOUGH DARKNESS HAD TAKEN ME, I HAD NOT CHANGED.

"BUT THE WORLD...

"THE WORLD *CERTAINLY* HAD."

"DEATH."

"DEATH AND RUIN. WITH EVERY STEP, ALL I FOUND WAS MORE.

"I KNEW NOTHING OF KURRN'S WAR. WHO HAD FALLEN, OR WHY.

"ALL I KNEW WAS THAT IT WAS ULTIMATELY MY FAULT.

"AND MY RESPONSIBILITY TO FIX."

THERE YOU ARE.

"AS HEARTENING AS IT WAS TO SEE ANOTHER LIVING THING, IT WAS ALSO BITTERSWEET."

"FOR MY HUNGER MEANT IT WOULD NOT LIVE MUCH LONGER.

"I WAITED FOR THE PERFECT MOMENT...

"AND THEN...

CLANG CLANG

"I HEARD THE SOUND OF STEEL. AND ONLY MEN MAKE STEEL.

"I HAD NO IDEA WHO I WAS RUNNING TO. FRIEND OR FOE, IT DID NOT MATTER.

"ALONE, AND HUNGRY AS I MIGHT HAVE BEEN...

"...I WAS NOT UNARMED."

ERYN! STAY BEHIND ME!

THERE'S TOO MANY OF THEM, GROST!

KLANK

GIVE US THE LAD!

YOUR PEOPLE MADE A DEAL.

BREAK IT AND THEY'LL ALL SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES.

BETTER THAT WE ALL GO TO HELL...

...THAN DEAL WITH DEVILS IN OUR VERY MIDST!

GAH!

YOU'LL PAY FOR THAT, ONE-EYE.

OLD AND GRIZZLED AS YOUR MEAT MIGHT BE...

...IT WILL FILL MY BELLY TONIGHT!

RAAAAGH!

THINK AGAIN, BEAST.

OHO! AND WHO MIGHT YOU BE, SWEETMEAT?

I'LL NOT HAVE MY NAME SULLIED BY YOUR FOUL BREATH, CREATURE.

I FELT IT, EVEN THEN.

SO, YOU MAY SIMPLY CALL ME DEATH.

SPEED. STRENGTH. UNLIKE ANYTHING I HAD EVER KNOWN.

BEYOND THAT, I COULD SENSE THEIR FOULNESS. THE SEETHING CORRUPTION COURSING THROUGH THEIR VEINS.

AND I SAW HOW TO CLEANSE IT.

RAAAAAGH!

NOT WITH ONE CUT. NOT WITH A THOUSAND.

LOOK OUT!

BUT ONE, WELL PLACED BLOW.

TO PIERCE ITS VERY HEART.

THANK YOU... ER... "DEATH", WAS IT?

YOU MAY CALL ME ATALA.

ATALA. MY NEPHEW AND I ARE IN YOUR DEBT. WE DON'T HAVE MUCH...

DO YOU HAVE ANYTHING TO EAT?

WHY OF COURSE... BACK AT THE VILLAGE...

EXCELLENT. LET'S START THERE.

CAW! CAW!

SHLUKK

NOW NOW, MY PRETTY. THERE'S PLENTY ELSE FOR YOU TO EAT.

CAWWW!

THIS PRETTY BAUBLE CAN REVEAL MANY SECRETS.

I'M SURE THE HOWLER WILL BE CURIOUS ABOUT WHO SLAUGHTERED THIS PACK. AS AM I.

LET'S FIND OUT, SHALL WE?

OH! IS THAT--HEH. HEHEH.

HAHAHAHA!

CAW?

OH, ATALA. AFTER ALL THESE YEARS.

I DO *SO* LOVE BEING SURPRISED.

TELL HIM.

GO.

CAW! CAW!

GRRR...

CAW!

GONE WITH YOU, SCRAP-STEALER! BEFORE I--

WAIT.

I KNOW THIS BIRD. WHEN HE COMES, HE COMES BEARING NEWS.

ISN'T THAT SO?

CAW! CAW!

"TELL ME WHAT THE WITCH HAS SEEN."

THOSE CREATURES... THE WEREWOLVES. WHAT WERE THEY TO YOU AND YOUR PEOPLE?

BANDITS, NOTHING MORE. THEY WAYLAY ANY WHO DARE TO TRAVEL THESE FORESTS.

THEY SEEMED QUITE FAMILIAR WITH YOU.

FOR BANDITS, I MEAN.

JUST TELL HER THE TRUTH, GROST.

AH, HELLS. I SUPPOSE.

BRIARGLEN, OUR HOME, HAS AN... ARRANGEMENT THAT HAS ALLOWED IT TO SURVIVE THESE DARK TIMES.

EVERY NEW MOON, WE SEND THEM A SACRIFICE. ONE OF OUR YOUNG.

IN RETURN, THEY MOSTLY LEAVE US BE. WE'VE LEARNED TO LIVE WITH IT, BUT...

BUT I SWORE I'D BE DAMNED IF I LET THEM TAKE MY SISTER'S SON.

YOU MUST THINK WE'RE MONSTERS.

I... NO! NO, OF COURSE NOT.

THE VILLAGE I COME FROM WAS BESIEGED BY DARKNESS, TOO. THEY DID WHAT THEY THOUGHT WAS RIGHT TO STAVE IT OFF.

THOUGH THAT ONLY WORKED FOR SO LONG. EVENTUALLY, THEY HAD TO FIGHT.

AND ALL THOSE SACRIFICES DID WAS MAKE THEM WEAKER.

HMF. THAT'S WHAT I'VE BEEN TRYING TO GET THROUGH THEIR SKULLS.

EVERY DAY WE SUBMIT, WE GROW WEAKER AND WEAKER.

COME SEE FOR YOURSELF.

BRIARGLEN

A STRANGER WOULD BE HARD ENOUGH TO EXPLAIN, BUT IF THEY SEE ERYN ALIVE, THEY'LL HANG ME FOR SURE. OR WORSE.

THEY'LL BLOW THE HORN TO SIGNAL THE MIDDAY MEAL, SOON.

"THOSE WORKING THE FIELDS WILL COME INSIDE THE GATES.

"THE GUARDS WILL BE WATCHING, OF COURSE...

"...BUT THEIR MINDS WILL BE ON THEIR STOMACHS MORE THAN THEIR EYES."

BWOOOOOOHHM

ZZZZZZZ

QUICKLY. I DON'T THINK ANYONE SAW US.

WHAT ABOUT HIM?

HERRICK'S DEEP IN HIS CUPS, AS USUAL.

"HE WON'T NOTICE A THING."

ZZZZZZZ

...HNCK!

IT'S NOT MUCH. I APOLOGIZE. AS I SAID, THESE ARE DARK TIMES.

PLEASE, GROST. I'M THANKFUL FOR WHATEVER YOU CAN SPARE.

I'LL SEE WHAT ELSE I CAN SCARE UP. AND TRY TO FIND OUT IF ANYONE SUSPECTS WHAT HAPPENED.

IN THE MEANTIME, STAY HERE, AND DON'T OPEN THE DOOR FOR ANYONE.

YOU SAID YOU CAME FROM A VILLAGE LIKE OURS? WHAT WAS IT CALLED?

IT DOESN'T MATTER. IT'S LONG, LONG GONE. AND PROBABLY FOR THE BETTER.

EVERY YEAR, WHEN HARVEST CAME, THEY LIVED IN FEAR OF THE BLOOD MOON.

AND EVERY YEAR, ANY BABE BORN UNDER IT WAS CAST IN A DEEP PIT, TO DIE.

BUT SOMETHING PECULIAR HAPPENED. ONE CHILD LIVED. LIVED, AND GREW STRONG.

AND WHEN THE ONE WHO RESCUED THEM TOLD THE CHILD HOW THEY CAME TO BE ABANDONED, THE CHILD SOUGHT VENGEANCE.

AND IT WAS DREADFUL TO BEHOLD.

IT'S VENGEANCE WHAT DARKENED THE WORLD IN THE FIRST PLACE.

THAT'S WHAT THE ELDER'S STORIES SAY, ANYWAY.

"OUR LORDS AND KINGS DROVE ALL THE CREATURES THEY HATED AND FEARED INTO THE DARKNESS.

"NEVER THINKING THOSE MONSTERS WERE SIMPLY WAITING FOR THE RIGHT MOMENT TO STRIKE FROM IT.

"EVEN HERE, WE HEAR WHISPERS OF THEIR MASTER, THE BLACK STAG.

"IN TRUTH, I KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DID TO STOKE HIS WRATH. BUT I WISH MY FOREBEARS HAD BEEN KINDER TO HIM.

"PERHAPS THEN HIS VENGEANCE WOULD NOT BE SO TERRIBLE."

PERHAPS HE WOULD LEAVE US IN PEACE.

NO.

THERE IS NO PEACE WHERE THAT ONE IS CONCERNED.

WHERE HE WALKS...

"DEATH AND BETRAYAL SOON FOLLOW."

AWHOOOO! AWHOOOOOOOO!

SOMETHING'S GOT THEIR DANDER UP TONIGHT.

LOOK!

AWHOOOO!

WE SHOULD... WE SHOULD SOUND THE ALARM.

"NOW."

AWHOOOOO!

EVERYONE, REMAIN CALM, PLEASE!

SOMETHING HAS ANGERED THEM... THAT'S OBVIOUS. IF WE CAN JUST FIGURE OUT HOW WE HAVE TRANSGRESSED, PERHAPS WE CAN--

I KNOW. I KNOW WHAT'S GOT THEIR IRE UP.

STRANGERS.

TWO OF 'EM. AND GROST HERE'S HIDING THEM.

WHA--

WAIT... I CAN EXPLAIN.

THERE'S NO NEED.

THIS MAN SHOWED ME KINDNESS IN THE WILD. YOU SHOULD BE PRAISING HIM, NOT ACCUSING HIM.

IS THAT... IS THAT THE BOY?! NO WONDER THE WOLVES HAVE COME.

SEIZE HIM, IMMEDIATELY!

NOT ONE STEP!

I TOLD YOU ONCE BEFORE, I'VE ALREADY LOST TOO MUCH TO THIS MADNESS.

I WILL NOT LOSE MY LAST KINSMAN.

TAKE HIM, TOO. THEY'LL WANT RECOMPENSE FOR THE OUTRAGE.

YOU HEARD HIM. NOT ONE STEP.

IN THE FOREST, GROST EXPLAINED HOW YOU SACRIFICE YOUR YOUTHS TO THESE FOUL BEASTS.

HE ASKED ME IF I THOUGHT YOU WERE ALL MONSTERS. AND I KNEW, THE WORLD IS A HARSH PLACE.

SO I SAID NO.

BUT THAT WAS A LIE.

FEAR HAS MADE MONSTERS OF YOU ALL.

EVIL LIKE THIS CANNOT BE PLACATED, CANNOT BE BARGAINED WITH!

IF IT DOES NOT CONSUME YOU FROM WITHOUT, IT WILL HAPPILY DO SO FROM WITHIN.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT IT? WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE--

I DON'T KNOW. MY PEOPLE FACED THE SAME CHOICE, AND DID THE SAME AS YOU.

BUT THEY PAID A GREATER PRICE IN THE END, REGARDLESS.

THERE IS NOTHING TO BE DONE, EXCEPT FIGHT. AND EVERY BABE YOU THROW TO THE WOLVES IS ONE THAT COULD HAVE WIELDED A BLADE AGAINST THEM.

I SAY, IF YOU'RE GOING TO SACRIFICE SOMEONE...

...GET RID OF THE ONES TOO AFRAID TO DO THE SAME.

I WAS WILLING TO ABIDE BY THE RULES. WILLING TO SACRIFICE MYSELF TO BUY ALL OF YOU ANOTHER SEASON.

ONE MORE SEASON OF MISERY, AND FEAR, WITH NAUGHT TO LOOK FORWARD TO EXCEPT ANOTHER DEATH.

AND THEN I SAW HER FIGHT THEM.

AND I REALIZED THAT IF IT IS MY DESTINY TO END UP IN THE BELLY OF A WOLF, THEN BY THE GODS, I'LL MAKE THEM PAY DEARLY FOR EVERY BITE.

IF YOU'RE TOO MUCH OF A COWARD TO WIELD THAT BLADE IN DEFENSE OF WHAT YOU LOVE...

...THEN GIVE IT TO SOMEONE WHO IS WILLING.

QUICKLY, TO THE GATES! WE HAVE LITTLE TIME.

I'LL CHECK THE--

HEH HEH HEH HEH

I HAD TO SEE IT WITH MY OWN EYES.

GREETINGS, ATALA. IT HAS BEEN A LONG TIME.

KERALLI.

OH, IT'S BLIGHTEYE, NOW. OUR LORD HAD US CAST ASIDE OUR HUMAN NAMES.

I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU CALL YOURSELF. YOU'LL DIE JUST THE...

...SAME?

PERHAPS I SHOULD KILL YOU NOW.

PLUCK OUT THOSE PRETTY EYES AND BRING THEM TO *HIM* AS A GIFT.

PERHAPS I SHOULD SEND HIM YOURS.

OH, I HAVE EYES *EVERYWHERE.*

YOU'LL NEVER GET THEM ALL.

MAYBE NOT.

...YOU *FEEL* IT WHEN EACH AND EVERY ONE GOES DIM.

BUT AS I RECALL, FROM BRIGHTER DAYS...

SO, HOW MANY MORE SHALL I TAKE?

ENOUGH. I'VE HAD MY FUN.

I KNOW NOT HOW IT IS YOU'VE RETURNED, BUT I CAN GUESS.

AND WHEN I LEARN THE TRUTH OF IT, KURRN WILL KNOW.

YOU SHOULD HAVE STAYED DEAD, ATALA.

"THARN IS OUT THERE. THEY CALL HIM THE HOWLER, NOW.

"YOU USED TO CALL HIM A SAVAGE. HE USED TO ENJOY IT, AS I RECALL.

"BUT I TELL YOU TRUE, YOU HAVE ***NO IDEA*** WHAT HE IS CAPABLE OF NOW.

"THAT DEATH OUR LORD GAVE YOU? ALL THOSE YEARS AGO?

AWWHOOOOOO!

"YOU WILL *BEG* FOR SUCH MERCY, BEFORE THE END."

GAVIN SMITH

BEFORE.

"IN OUR TIME TOGETHER, KURRN TOLD ME MANY THINGS THAT TURNED OUT TO BE LIES."

WE SHOULD BE CLOSE.

SHH, THARN.

"I CAN ONLY IMAGINE IT WAS THE SAME FOR THARN, AND THE REST."

SHH YOURSELF, ATALA.

YOU SOUND LIKE A PAIR OF OGRES STUMBLING THROUGH A BRIAR PATCH.

ENOUGH, KERALLI. ARE WE CLOSE?

INDEED... YOUR QUARRY IS JUST AHEAD.

"KURRN PLAYED ON MY EMOTIONS. PERHAPS HE PLAYED ON THARN'S HUNGER FOR GLORY."

QUICKLY, THEN... LET'S--

NO. YOU CIRCLE AROUND, CUT OFF ITS ESCAPE.

BUT--

NO BUTS.

REMEMBER, KURRN PUT ME IN CHARGE OF THIS HUNT.

"KURRN HAD TOLD US THE GREAT BEASTS WERE A PLAGUE ON MANKIND, BUT THE WOLF LOOKED PEACEFUL ENOUGH."

AWHOO!

"STILL, I BELIEVED IN THE WORLD KURRN WANTED TO BUILD.

"OR, AT LEAST THE WORLD HE TOLD ME WANTED TO BUILD.

"AND YET, IN THE GREAT BEAST'S EYES, I SAW NO EVIL.

"DESPITE EVERYTHING I HAD BEEN TOLD, I KNEW...

"... THIS CREATURE MEANT ME NO HARM.

"THAT IS, UNTIL IT REALIZED THE FEELING WAS NOT MUTUAL."

"IT WAS MADNESS... BUT I HAD TO KNOW.

"IT COULD REND ME TO SHREDS. DEVOUR ME WHOLE.

"BUT WOULD IT?

"HAD KURRN BEEN MISTAKEN?

"ALAS, I WOULD GET NO ANSWERS THAT DAY."

GRAAAAH!

AWAY FROM HER, MONSTER!

SHLUKK

TAKE THAT!

YIPE!

GRAH!

ATALA! QUICKLY!

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

"WHAT, INDEED? IF THE BEAST HAD NOT MEANT US HARM..."

"...IT CERTAINLY DID NOW."

"PERHAPS IT WAS MERELY ONE OF SURVIVAL.

"AT LEAST, THAT'S WHAT I TOLD MYSELF."

ATALA! PLEASE! I CAN'T HOLD IT.

"PERHAPS IT WAS NOT A QUESTION OF GOOD OR EVIL.

AROOO!

"I HELPED THARN SURVIVE."

I'M SORRY, THARN. I DON'T KNOW WHAT CAME OVER ME...

DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT. KILL'S A KILL. KURRN WILL BE HAPPY.

"I LET HIM TAKE THE CREDIT. TO HIDE MY DOUBTS FROM KURRN'S EYES."

ESPECIALLY WHEN HE GETS HIS TROPHY.

"I THOUGHT IT WOULD SATE THARN'S HUNGER. BUT IT ONLY GREW..."

"...AND GREW."

TEAR THEM TO SHREDS! I WANT A PLATTER FULL OF HEARTS FOR MY TABLE TONIGHT!

ARHOOO!

STEADY... STEADY! FIRE!

GRAAAH!

THWACK

THWACK

THWACK

THWACK

RELOAD! MORE ARE COMING!

HURRY!

THWACK

THWACK

THWACK

THWACK

THWACK

THWACK

THWACK

GRRRRRR!

LOOK OUT!

RAAAH!

AAGH!

OOF!

DIE, BEAST!

HA!

DO AS I SAY, MONSTER!

OH, BLOODY HELL.

DEFEND THE WALL!

WE NEED MORE MEN!

FORWARD!

ERYN! GET TO SAFETY!

WHO'S FIGHT IS THIS, IF NOT MINE?

I DIDN'T SAVE YOU IN THE FOREST JUST TO LOSE YOU NOW!

AS I RECALL, IT WAS I WHO DID THE SAVING.

NOT THAT I HOLD IT AGAINST YOU!

ATALA! WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?

JUST CATCHING UP WITH AN OLD FRIEND.

UNFORTUNATELY, SHE SURVIVED.

CAN'T SAY THE SAME FOR THOSE WOLVES. WE'LL WIN THE DAY YET!

EH? WHAT...

LOOK OUT!

THOOOM!

HRRRGH.

TAKE THAT!

CRASH

HEH.

AROOO!

GROST! ERYN!

OUCH.

I'M ALL RIGHT.

SUCH STRENGTH... HOW CAN WE...

WE MUST. WATCH OUT!

SKLUTCH

ATALA! GROST! WE MAKE OUR STAND HERE!

I'LL TEAR YOUR THROAT OUT!

FOUL BEAST!

HOLD!

HOLD, I SAY!

CEASE THIS BATTLE, OR SO HELP ME...

I'LL KILL HIM MYSELF.

HOLD, GROST.

HAHAHA! YOU'LL WHAT, OLD MAN? KILL THE BOY BEFORE WE DO?

YOUR... MASTER AND I HAD AN AGREEMENT. THIS BOY WAS MEANT TO BE HIS TRIBUTE... AND IT CAN STILL BE SO.

OH, REALLY?

YOU BROKE OUR AGREEMENT. AND ARE CURRENTLY PAYING THE PRICE. YOU HAVE NOTHING TO BARGAIN WITH, OLD MAN.

TAKE HIM!

I SAY AGAIN, HE'S NOT ENOUGH.

TAKE THEM ALL! OUR CHILDREN ARE HIDDEN, I CAN SHOW YOU WHERE, I CAN--

HURRK!

THAT WAS SOME SHOT...

BUT WHO?

ENOUGH. NO MORE "AGREEMENTS." NO MORE DEALS.

IF WE ARE TO DIE AT THE HANDS OF THESE BEASTS...

...LET US DIE WITH OUR HUMANITY INTACT!

RAAAAH!

RAAAAH!

THAT SUITS US JUST FINE.

DIE THEN, "HUMAN"!

NOT SO FAST, THARN.

HAVEN'T YOU HEARD? THEY CALL ME THE HOWLER NOW.

AYE. AND HOWL YOU WILL...

...WHEN I PLUNGE THIS HORN INTO YOUR HEART!

GRA

AAH!

GAVIN SMITH

"KURRN USED TO SAY THAT EVERY BATTLE WAS AN OPPORTUNITY.

"TO PROVE ONE'S STRENGTH. EXPOSE ONE'S WEAKNESSES.

"IF YOU SIMPLY OBSERVE THE ENEMY...

"OPPORTUNITIES PRESENT THEMSELVES.

"OPPORTUNITIES THAT, ONCE SEIZED...

"COULD HERALD VICTORIES UNDREAMT OF."

YOU'VE GOTTEN FASTER, THARN...

BUT NOT FAST ENOUGH!

THE THARN YOU KNEW IS GONE, ATALA.

THERE IS ONLY THE HOWLER!

THEN WHY AREN'T YOU HOWLING?

WHAT DO YOU--

A WOUND LIKE THAT WOULD MAKE ANY MAN HOWL IN PAIN.

WHA?

AH WELL. PERHAPS YOU NEED ANOTHER!

GRAAAHWOOO!

GRA... GRRR...

THAT'S BETTER.

NOW!

THWANG

FIRE!

THWANG

THWANG

THWACK

THWACK

THWACK

LOOK OUT!

CHARGE!

RAAAH!

CAN'T LET THEM HAVE ALL THE FUN...

NO. NO INDEED.

YOU...

YES. ME.

I TOLD YOU, THARN WAS LONG GONE. YOU FACE THE HOWLER.

YOU MAY HAVE TAKEN MY EYE.

BUT I STILL HAVE ALL I NEED...

...TO STRIKE HARD, AND TRUE.

NO! ATALA!

THAT'S A NICE EYEPATCH.

I'LL HAVE TO REMEMBER TO PEEL IT OFF YOUR CORPSE.

"FALLING.

"AGAIN.

"OR WAS IT THE FIRST TIME?

"MOTHER? FATHER? WERE THE OMENS REALLY THAT BAD?

"BAD ENOUGH TO SEND ME STRAIGHT INTO *HIS* CLUTCHES?"

"I SHOULD BE DEAD FROM A FALL LIKE THAT. BUT THERE IS MAGIC HERE.

"AND THERE IS... THERE IS...

"... SOMETHING ELSE.

"I TRY TO STAY QUIET... BUT IT'S NO USE.

"IT *SEES* ME."

RELAX, CHILD. I WON'T HURT YOU. BUT I MUST ADMIT, I AM PUZZLED TO SEE YOU IN SUCH A PLACE. HOW DID YOU COME TO BE HERE?

THE... THERE WAS A BLOOD MOON. THE ELDERS SAID WE NEEDED A SACRIFICE TO THE BEAST. MY PARENTS...

AH. BARBARIC SUPERSTITIONS. I MIGHT HAVE KNOWN.

BUT WORRY NOT, CHILD. I KNOW THE BEAST THEY SOUGHT TO PLACATE WITH YOUR BLOOD.

IN FACT, I SLEW IT MYSELF.

I AM KURRN. WHAT MAY I CALL YOU?

ATALA.

YOU... SLAY MONSTERS?

I HUNT THEM, YES. FROM THE HIGHEST PEAKS TO THE DARKEST DEPTHS, AS YOU CAN SEE.

THOUGH I'M BEGINNING TO WONDER WHO THE REAL MONSTERS ARE.

SACRIFICING AN INNOCENT CHILD TO A FEAR YOU'VE NEVER EVEN SEEN SEEMS MONSTROUS TO ME.

MAYBE YOU SHOULD HUNT *THEM*, THEN.

ARE YOU SURE, ATALA? CAN YOU CAST THEM AWAY SO EASILY, KNOWING HOW MUCH THEY LOVED YOU, DESPITE THEIR BETRAYAL?

I ONLY ASK, BECAUSE IT WILL TAKE A HARD HEART TO DO WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE, IN THE END. A HARD HEART INDEED.

SO I WILL ASK YOU THIS, ONLY ONCE. WILL YOU DO WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO RID THE WORLD OF THESE MONSTERS?

YES.

VERY WELL. LET'S LEAVE THESE CATACOMBS.

AND THEN YOU CAN SHOW ME WHERE YOUR VILLAGE IS.

I WAS A FOOL.

YOU WERE A CHILD. LOST IN THE DARK.

AS FOOLS GO, WE BEASTS WERE THE GREATER ONES.

WE IMPRISONED THE BLACK STAG, OUR BROTHER. WE THOUGHT PERHAPS, IN TIME, HE WOULD CHANGE. REPENT. AND LEARN.

BUT ALL HE LEARNED WAS HOW TO HIDE HIS HATE FOR MANKIND BEHIND A FAIR GUISE.

I'M... I'M SORRY I KILLED YOU.

HE TOLD ME... HE TOLD ME WE WERE RIDDING THE WORLD OF MONSTERS.

YOU WERE, IN HIS EYES. IT WAS OUR SACRED CHARGE TO HOLD BACK THE DARKNESS, THAT YOUR KIND MIGHT FLOURISH. YET WHEN KURRN LOOKED UPON YOU, ALL HE COULD SEE WERE YOUR MANY, MANY EVILS.

BUT THERE IS GOOD, TOO.

CAN WE STILL STOP HIM?

HE HAS ONLY GROWN IN POWER SINCE WE WERE VANQUISHED. IT IS A FOOL'S ERRAND.

WELL, WE ALREADY KNOW I'M ONE OF THOSE.

BACK, MONSTER!

DO YOU THINK YOUR LITTLE TWIGS WILL HARM ME? YOU'RE WELCOME TO TRY.

I'LL TEAR YOU LIMB FROM-- EH?

SHALL I TELL HIM YOU NEED MORE WEREWOLVES?

WHAT NEWS SHALL I BRING OUR LORD, HOWLER?

TELL HIM HE MADE A MISTAKE WHEN HE KILLED ATALA.

TELL HIM HE GOT SLOPPY.

TELL HIM IT FELL UPON ME TO CLEAN UP HIS MESS.

TELL HIM I TOOK ALL OF THESE LIVES AS PAYMENT.

STARTING WITH THIS ONE.

=GASP=

WHAT ARE YOU STARING AT?

HELLO AGAIN, HOWLER.

IF YOU DON'T WANT TO STAY DEAD, ATALA...

...I'LL JUST HAVE TO *MAKE* YOU!

ATALA IS GONE, THARN.

CALL ME HEARTPIERCER.

LET'S SEE YOU GET UP FROM *THAT.*

HURRAH!

HEARTPIERCER!

ATALA!

HURRAH!

BEHOLD! A NEW DAY DAWNS. A DAY OF VICTORY!

NIGHT WILL FALL AGAIN, MY FRIENDS... WE KNOW THIS AS SURELY AS THE SUN CROSSES THE SKY.

BUT WE ALSO KNOW HOW WE WILL MEET IT...

...WITH BLADES DRAWN, AND HEADS HELD HIGH... FOR WE HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR FROM THE DARKNESS!

LATER...

WE'LL FIGURE OUT WHAT TO DO WITH THIS LATER.

AHEM...

I HOPE YOU'RE NOT GOING TO ASK ME TO STAY. I'VE TOLD EVERY SINGLE PERSON HERE NO. TWICE.

NO, NO. WE'RE NOT *THAT* DUMB.

WE WANTED TO SAY THANK YOU.

"YOU SAVED THIS VILLAGE, IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE."

"AND WE KNOW, YOU MEAN TO SAVE THE WORLD, NEXT."

SO WE'RE COMING WITH YOU.

DON'T BE FOOLS. IT'S MUCH TOO DANGEROUS.

WITH ALL DUE RESPECT, HEARTPIERCER, IF IT'S AS SUICIDAL AND IMPOSSIBLE A TASK AS YOU SAY...

"...YOU'LL NEED ALL THE FOOLS YOU CAN GET."

RICH DOUEK is an acclaimed comic book writer known for his compelling storytelling and dynamic narratives, known for harrowing horror tales like *Sea of Sorrows*, and the Bram Stoker Award finalist, *Road of Bones*. *Heartpiercer* represents a triumphant return to writing in the fantasy genre, which he has not worked in since his first book, *Gutter Magic*. Beyond his independent work, Rich has contributed to the Eisner-nominated *Superman: Red and Blue*, Marvel's *Wastelanders*, and the GLAAD Media Award winning *Young Men in Love*, among several other acclaimed anthologies. Rich was born and bred in NYC, and lives just outside of it now with his family and two cats.

GAVIN SMITH is an artist out of Indianapolis, Indiana. Outside of *Heartpiercer*, his projects he's known for include the ongoing *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* series, *TMNT: Alpha*, *TMNT: Black, White, and Green*, *Star Trek: The Mirror War*, cover art for *Godzilla, The Last Ronin*, *The Armageddon Game*, and *Star Trek: Resurgence* from IDW. Other projects include *Ghost in the Shell*, *Heavy Metal Magazine*, *The Accelerators*, and he is the co-creator and artist for *Dead Legends* from A Wave Blue World. He's also a 2011 graduate of the Kubert School and now teaches their online Narrative Art program. He's also represented by Modern Mythology Comic Art.

JUSTIN BIRCH is a Ringo Award nominated letterer born and raised in the hills of West Virginia. Lettering comics since 2015, he is a member of the lettering studio AndWorld Design and has worked with AWA, Boom!, DC, Dark Horse, IDW, Image, Mad Cave Studios, and numerous indie publishers. Justin still lives in West Virginia, only now it's with his loving wife, daughters, and their dog, Kirby.

NICHOLAS BURGDORF has colored a handful of indie titles over the last few years, but *Heartpiercer* is his first work for Dark Horse Comics.

ROSHAN KURICHIYANIL is an Indian artist and colorist who works in the animation and comic book industries. Since transitioning from directing animated short films to focusing on comic books in 2015, Rosh has worked as a colorist for publishers like Dark Horse, Image, Vault, AfterShock, Dynamite Entertainment, and Action Labs Comics. He has also illustrated short comics for the anthologies *Black Mumba* and *RazorBlades*. Rosh is passionate about the storytelling power of color and enjoys experimenting with different media to explore this further.

AFTERWORD

It's funny how quickly things can fall apart. Not a humorous sort of funny, but the kind of funny that makes you shrug and wonder how the world could be so different than what you thought it was. And despite it being so dire, you almost do have to laugh when you realize what a fool you were to think you knew how the world worked.

That's the situation I found myself in last year, the winter of 2023. In the span of a couple of weeks, I lost my job of seven years, and my father to a heart issue. Suddenly, like Atala, I found myself plummeting down into darkness, and coming to in a world that I barely recognized.

We all put faith in our institutions - we even to a certain extent build our identities around them - our jobs, our families, our governments. We fill our chosen roles, and tell ourselves that's who we are. And then, a day comes when it all gets ripped away.

That, at its core, is what *Heartpiercer* is about. It's about what happens when everything you thought you knew turned out to be a lie. When the path you thought you chose yourself was in fact laid out for you, by someone who didn't have your best interests at heart.

It's about figuring out what's left when everything has been taken away from you, and finding out just who you are, when there's nothing left from your old life to cling to.

As I write this, I've spent the better part of a year trying to figure that out for myself, in the face of losses that tore through me just as sure as that horn tore through Atala in the first few pages. And my regrets haunt me just as much as hers do.

But what I can take from *Heartpiercer* on a personal level is that Atala found the strength to move past her regrets, and accept her imperfections. She learned to draw power from within herself and triumph over the doubts that held her back. In the end, she decided who she was. What kind of person she was going to be going forward.

It feels a little strange to be inspired by a story that came from your own head, but *Heartpiercer* really does do that for me. It pushes me to take a step forward, at a time where all I want to do is stand still. I hope it does the same for you.

From our entire creative team - myself, Gavin Smith, Nicholas Burgdorf, Justin Birch, Roshan Kurichiyanil, and our editor Konner Knudsen, thank you so much for coming along with us on this journey.

– RICH

Pitch cover for *Heartpiercer* by Gavin Smith

ATALA THOUGHT SHE WAS SAVING THE WORLD...

But in hunting down the great beasts, she wound up dooming it. Betrayed by her lord, Kurrn, and left for dead, she awakes in a dark world overrun by nightmares, with a single mission on her mind: revenge. But before she can avenge herself on Kurrn, she must deal with the devastation left in his wake - beginning with a tribe of vicious werewolves menacing one of the last human settlements.

As she confronts the bestial Howler and comes to terms with her own past, Atala must unlock a deep and ancient power inside herself if she is to survive, much less triumph.

A thrilling new dark fantasy world from the minds of writer Rich Douek (*Breath of Shadows, Sea of Sorrows, Road of Bones*) and artist Gavin Smith (*TMNT, Star Trek: The Mirror War*), with colors by Nicholas Burgdorf and Roshan Kurichiyanil and lettering by Justin Birch.

"Heartpiercer *wastes no time in setting up our main characters and their conflicts, as we see how one fatal mistake condemns the world to darkness.*"

- COMICBOOK.COM

"...The kind of magical sword and sorcery ride that's as rare as a unicorn, and as sharp as a dragon's tooth."

- ETHAN SACKS (STAR WARS: BOUNTY HUNTERS, A HAUNTED GIRL)

"Heartpiercer *has all the elements of a great fantasy adventure - action, intrigue, mystery, and heart.*"

- CAPES AND TIGHTS

"Heartpiercer *stuck me in the guts, twisted the blade, & scratched an itch for dark fantasy I didn't know I had.*"

-RYAN LEE (MOUNTAINHEAD)

DARK HORSE BOOKS

SON OF ULTRON

"THIS FAN... THIS MONSTER!"